

Bombs to cargo this Airman has done it all

By Steven Diamond
15th Airlift Wing Historian

Not many Airmen today can lay claim to witnessing the attack of Dec. 7, 1941, as well as bombing Berlin in 1944 and providing humanitarian aid to that same city only a few years later. But retired Lt. Col. James Williams, who visited Hickam recently, can make the claim and more.

In 1941, then-Sergeant Williams was in the second year of his military career, assigned to Wheeler Field. On the morning of 7 Dec. 7, 1941, Sergeant Williams had risen early to play tennis. He left his brand new 1941 silver-gray Buick Special idling outside his quarters while he went inside to change clothes. He had just picked-up the Buick the day before at the docks.

At that moment, the first wave of Japanese fighters and horizontal bombers descended on Wheeler and attacked. Quickly, over half of the fighter command's P-36s and P-40s were engulfed in flames. Two of Wheeler's fighter pilots, 2nd Lts. Kenneth Taylor and George Welch, ran outside and instantly assessed the situation. Without asking anyone's permission, they jumped into Sergeant Williams' Buick and sped off to Haleiwa where their own P-36s were positioned for gunnery practice. The rest is history, as Taylor and Welch scored the first American aerial victories in the Pacific War.

Ironically, although the Buick survived a harrowing ride up Kamehameha Highway during which Taylor and Welch were strafed by a Japanese Zero, the parked car was destroyed by an enemy bomb on the beach.

As Colonel Williams joked, "I didn't even have time to get it insured! But at that time it didn't make much difference — you just thanked God you were alive."

Even before Dec. 7, Sergeant Williams had put his name in for pilot school. Within a month following the attack, Williams was on his way back to the mainland to attend the pilot training. Before the war, that course had required nearly two years. Once America joined the war, the course was condensed to just six months. By the next year, Williams was flying B-17Ds and in 1944 he participated in two bombing raids over Berlin.

After the war ended, Sergeant Williams stayed in the Air Force and flew cargo aircraft. So it was that during the Berlin Airlift of 1948-49, Sergeant Williams flew more than 200 missions in C-54s, supplying desperately needed humanitarian aid to the city he once bombed. From the opening salvo of World War II to beyond war's end, James Williams was both eyewitness and actor in Air Force history.

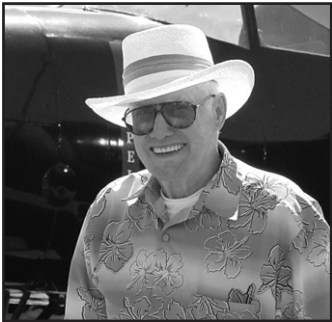


Photo by Tech. Sgt. Andrew Leonhard
Retired Lt. Col. James Williams, lays claim to bombing and resupplying Berlin, Germany.



Photo by Senior Airman Sarah Clark
Home again
Airman 1st class Shaun Miller, 15th Security Forces Squadron, is greeted by his wife, Maggie, Tuesday after returning from Afghanistan.